Charles Richard Drew

Washington, D.C. ' Amherst ' McGill ' Columbia ' Howard University

In Sixty Seconds

Origins. Charles Richard Drew was born on June 3, 1904 in the Foggy Bottom neighborhood of Washington, D.C., the oldest of five. His father was a carpet layer, his mother a Howard-educated homemaker. He won the James E. Walker Memorial Medal as the best all-around athlete at Dunbar High School in 1922 and went north to Amherst College on a track and football scholarship, one of thirteen Black students on a campus of six hundred.

Work. After five years of teaching and coaching at Morgan College in Baltimore to save tuition, he earned his medical degree from McGill University in Montreal in 1933, finishing second in his class. At Columbia University's medical school he joined the laboratory of John Scudder and began the work that became his 1940 doctoral dissertation, Banked Blood: A Study in Blood Preservation. He was the first Black American to earn a Doctor of Medical Science degree from Columbia. The dissertation became the blueprint for the first modern blood bank.

Impact. In 1940 he took over the Blood for Britain program, shipping roughly 5,500 liters of plasma across the Atlantic to British armed forces. In 1941 the American Red Cross made him the first director of its national blood bank. When the U.S. military ordered the donated blood segregated by donor race, a policy with no scientific basis that he had personally disproved in his dissertation, he resigned. He returned to Howard University as chair of surgery and spent the next decade training the next generation of Black American surgeons.

Legacy. Charles R. Drew University of Medicine and Science opened in Los Angeles in 1966. The plasma-storage and transfusion protocols he designed remain the foundation of every modern blood bank. The surgeons he trained at Howard, more than half of the Black board-certified surgeons in the United States at mid-century, populated departments across the country. He died on April 1, 1950 after a car accident in North Carolina at the age of 45. He was survived by his wife Minnie and four children.

The Network

John Scudder

Columbia research partner. Principal investigator at Columbia's blood preservation laboratory. Recruited Drew into the plasma research in 1938, supervised his doctoral dissertation, and recommended him as medical supervisor of Blood for Britain in 1940.

Minnie Lenore Robbins Drew

Wife. A teacher at Spelman College when Drew met her at a professional conference in 1939. They married later that year. She raised their four children, Bebe, Charlene, Rhea, and Charles Jr., and preserved his papers after his 1950 death.

W. Montague Cobb

Howard colleague. Howard anatomist, editor of the Journal of the National Medical Association, and longtime public advocate for the integration of the American Medical Association. Carried forward Drew's campaign against the AMA's state-level exclusion of Black physicians after 1950.

Charlene Drew Jarvis

Daughter. Neuroscientist and longtime member of the Council of the District of Columbia. Served as president of Southeastern University in Washington from 1996 to 2009 and has preserved the family record of her father's life and work.

For Discussion

1. Drew resigned from the Red Cross national blood bank in 1941 after the military ordered blood segregated by donor race. His own Columbia dissertation had already shown there was no biological difference. What does it take for a scientist to resign over a policy the science directly contradicts, and what institutional incentives make such resignations rare?
2. The myth that Drew was denied a blood transfusion because he was Black endured for decades despite being documented as false by the three colleagues in the car with him. Why did that story resonate so strongly, and what is the responsibility of a Black biographer when the more dramatic story turns out to be less accurate than the true one?
3. Drew trained the majority of Black board-certified surgeons practicing in the United States at mid-century from a single department chair at Howard. What made one appointment at one institution so consequential for Black medical representation, and which contemporary academic departments play a similar consolidation role today?
4. Blood for Britain shipped roughly 5,500 liters of plasma to British forces between August 1940 and January 1941 with no bacterial contamination traced to the supply. What specific technical innovations made that record possible, and how does it read against the state of blood storage immediately before Drew's program?
5. Drew's dissertation Banked Blood remains the blueprint for modern blood preservation. What is the difference between an invention that everyone uses and an invention whose creator's name everyone remembers, and what decides which category a scientific contribution falls into?

Primary Sources

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3. Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University. Charles R. Drew Papers, 1935-1950.

4. American Red Cross. Historical archives of the Blood Donor Service, 1941-1945. Washington, D.C.

5. NAACP. 1944 Spingarn Medal citation, awarded to Charles Richard Drew.